Summary Report of the External Review Committee on

Residential Life and the Commons System Middlebury College

January 2019

Introduction

The administration of Middlebury College appointed the External Review Committee on Residential Life and the Commons System and invited them to campus on October 29 and 30, 2018. The Committee included faculty and senior administrators from Connecticut College, Carleton College, Kenyon College, and Rice University.

The Committee reviewed the Self-Study Report "How Will We Live Together," the consultant report by James Terhune Consulting, the 1998 Middlebury report "The Enhanced Residential Plan," and a number of other documents. The committee held extensive and multiple conversations with stakeholders during their visit to campus. These included meetings with past Heads, current Heads, Commons Deans, Commons Resident Directors, the chairs and representatives of the Self-Study Committee, and many other faculty, staff and students.

The 1998 Middlebury Enhanced Residential Plan proposed three major "Cornerstones" of a new Commons system and the external review determined that several of the original "Cornerstones" have been implemented. They also noted however, that the parts that Middlebury was unable to implement have had a very significant impact on the level to which the plan's goals were achieved.

The Cornerstone proposals included a new decentralized dining system with a dining hall associated with each new Commons; construction of houses for faculty "associates" (now called "Heads") in close proximity to each residential Commons and "visible" from each respective Commons; and continuing housing for students in each Commons such that "each Commons should have students from all four classes living within it, as older students are important role models and will provide experienced leadership for the Commons."

In making these major recommendations, the 1998 report stated "trips to other campuses, especially Rice University, revealed that decentralized residential systems can create many significant opportunities for student leadership. A primary goal of the enhanced residential plan, then, is to give students more hands-on, local governance of residential life. Students should also be encouraged to take initiatives that establish identities and instill Commons traditions."

Much of the external review focused on gauging the extent to which these Cornerstones were implemented and to which the goals of the new Commons system were achieved. The full implementation of 1998 proposal would have required a very substantial capital investment in residential housing and dining. Due to financial constraints, significant compromises were made and Middlebury's proposals were, in all cases, only partially implemented. Students do not live in their Commons for all four years, Heads houses are not uniformly in proximity to their Commons, and dining remains shared amongst different Commons. The consequences of these compromises have played out over the past two decades, leading to the conclusions of the Self-Study, the Terhune report, and those set forth in this report that question the value of continuing

the program as it is currently designed.

The "How Will We Live Together" self study, in particular, offers a very comprehensive review of the strengths and challenges of the current approach at Middlebury. The external review builds on this work to offer the College ideas about how to use this information to maximize the impact of the programs and resources dedicated to students' residential experience. The external review was structured around the following four themes:

1. Identification of what elements are working well;
2. A recommendation that the Commons system be envisioned as a first-year experience program;
3. Identification of opportunities for repurposing resources to further enhance faculty engagement in residential life; and
4. General recommendations on where improvements can be made to the residential life program, and student life generally.

Elements of the Commons System that Work Well

The Self-Study and external review highlighted several components of the Commons the reviewers recommend for continuation. Some will require adjustments to further enhance their impact on the student experience. This section highlights the areas to continue; subsequent sections will elaborate in further detail recommendations for the future.

Commons Deans

The Commons Deans are one of the greatest strengths of the Commons. Each Commons Dean develops close relationships with students over four years and supports them during challenging moments, while also celebrating individual and group accomplishments. It is clear to students that when they need assistance, their Commons Dean is a critical "go to" resource. It is also clear to faculty and staff that whenever they need to share information or reach out for support with regards to a student, the Commons Dean serves as the single most important point of contact. Despite the need for some improvements, the reviewers acknowledged the critical role the Deans provide as a central locus of support for students over their four years at Middlebury.

First-Year Seminars

The first-year seminars introduce students to coursework at Middlebury College. The fact that students in each seminar live in close proximity enhances their academic and social integration. A key component of the first-year seminar and its intersection with the broader first-year experience is that the faculty member teaching the course is the pre-major advisor to all students in the course. This system enables a meaningful student-advisor relationship because of the frequency and depth of contact between first-year students and faculty members, especially in the first semester.

Commons Residence Director

The Commons Residence Director (CRD) position has been an important recent addition to the Middlebury student affairs staff. Moving away from Middlebury young alumni to post-masters professional staff members aligns the College with staffing models at peer institutions, and brings staff with the training and

essential skills to support students' development and growth through the residential experience. In short, the CRDS serve a vital function in the evolving residential program.

Faculty Engagement

The faculty engaged in the Commons system are passionate about their role within the Commons and their impact on the broader College. Past and current Commons Heads enthusiastically described the ways that they have created space for students to connect with each other and with faculty and staff, and to be challenged intellectually. A particularly important function that the Commons Heads serve is hosting meals in their College homes with first-year seminar groups, Commons groups, and in support of other department/college events. While the review acknowledges the very special contribution that the Commons Heads make to the Middlebury experience, it also finds that their role appears to be misunderstood by students, and that many of the role's beneficial aspects need not be connected to the Commons system at all to occur.

Family Dinners

Students, faculty, and staff expressed great enthusiasm about the family dinners in Atwater Dining Hall, which offers students of all class years the opportunity to gather with their "Commons Family" to eat and enjoy each other's company. Students connect with peers that they don't see on a regular basis and are able to dine with faculty and staff and their family/guests, thereby making the Middlebury campus experience feel small and connected. The review notes that the family dinner concept is not necessarily contingent on the Commons system and could be maintained in other models.

Redefining the Commons as a First-Year Program

As noted above, first-year seminars and dinners/events are major features of the Commons experience. The review team noted that during the site visit, several students highlighted the positive impact first-year seminars had in strengthening curricular engagement and connecting with faculty and their peers. Some students further indicated that because of the first-year seminar, they took additional classes with their designated professor or roomed with a classmate in future years. However, students, faculty and staff commented that once the first-year seminars concluded, the familiarity with and impact of the Commons program diminished. They were unable to identify additional programs/services that led them to continue to engage in Commons programs beyond the first-year.

A recalibration of the Commons experience is warranted: in essence, Middlebury should clarify that the Commons experience is a first-year experience program that provides a unique opportunity for Middlebury to focus on a critical transition period for students. Creating a dedicated first-year experience program focused on high-touch and high-impact practices should increase students' sense of belonging at Middlebury, and reduce some of the tensions related to diversity and inclusion that we heard about during our visit to campus. To redefine the Commons as a first-year program, first-year housing should be redistributed so all first-year students reside in close proximity. Ideally, this redistribution would organize around Ross and Atwater, two locations originally designed for the Commons.

Along with the redistribution of first-year housing, Middlebury should strengthen the residentially based first-year seminar program. These seminars should function as a gateway to the liberal arts and facilitate student transition to Middlebury through intensive engagement between faculty and students. Residentially based seminars that are organized in interdisciplinary clusters based on shared themes

provide an opportunity for students to live and study together and would provide a foundation for Middlebury students' overall four-year residential experience. Seminar clusters could also dine together on a regular basis, with Atwater providing a gathering place following special events/lectures. Additionally, residential-based programming could also be offered that enables students to consider the connections among the seminars within each cluster.

The reviewers strongly recommend that the Commons Deans role be restructured so they are connected to an interdisciplinary first-year seminar cluster(s). The Commons Deans have multifaceted and impactful roles that are well understood by students and faculty, serving as advisors, counselors and supervisors, among other supportive responsibilities. Linking the Commons Deans to a group(s) of first-year seminars would further strengthen the integration of student life and academic affairs. The review also suggests that central areas be identified where Commons Deans can be together in one or two office suites in proximity to the dining halls, thereby facilitating accessibility for students.

In addition, the committee suggests that the relationship among first-year seminar faculty and the Commons Deans be strengthened through the creation of "advising teams." All faculty teaching first-year seminars within a Commons would work as a team, coordinated by the Commons Deans, to support the students within the Commons through academic programming and social events/dinners. Another enhancement opportunity for the first-year seminars is to establish a shared set of goals that will facilitate some consistency of purpose across all first-year seminars.

There are additional opportunities that could be created by dedicating the Commons system as a first-year program. There appears to be no purpose and no gain from the current four-year membership in a Commons. The artificial connection of non-first-year students to their Commons produces added complexity to the decentralized system of student support, since upper-class students typically live in residence halls associated with one Commons while being members of another. Therefore, the connection of sophomores, juniors and seniors to their first-year Commons is currently viewed as superficial with no real substance. With the proposal to designate the Commons as a first-year program, sophomores could be liberated to live wherever they choose, and not just in their original Commons, as juniors and seniors currently can.

Enhancing Faculty Engagement

The review suggests that redefining the Commons program as a first-year experience program creates greater flexibility for reimagining the programs, resources, and efforts currently applied towards the Commons. It further states that the most notable of these is the role of the Commons Heads. First, it is clear that the faculty who serve in the role of Commons Head maintain a deep passion for and commitment to engagement with students and to student personal development. Commons Heads discussed the rewarding and inspiring relationships they had developed with students.The reviewers observed that the role of Commons Head has evolved, since the former Heads reported more robust programming than is represented in the current Self-Study. Nevertheless, the faculty commitment remains strong.

The review suggests however that a disconnect exists between the view of the Heads and the views of the students, and was expressed both in their in-person interviews and in the survey data in the Self-Study. Despite evidence that students' engagement with the Heads is often significant in their first year, the reviewers noted that none of the students they met knew what the intended role of the Head was, thinking of them primarily as back-up advisors. The review hypothesizes that this disconnect is

because Heads do have a significant impact on a small number of students, but that this number is a small fraction of all students in each Commons. As such, most students in any sample have not experienced this significant relationship.

The review team offered the observation, based on their meetings with students, that those students who did have significant relationships with Heads had formed those relationships in contexts largely or entirely unrelated to the Commons. Heads are typically excellent teachers and advisors, and the dinners they host attract students from across all five Commons. According to the students, these were the contexts, not the Commons themselves, that create the faculty-student relationship.

The conclusion offered by the reviewers is therefore that the faculty Heads could serve a much broader role for the College if the role is liberated from the Commons. The current connection confines the role, limiting its impact while resulting in large expenses for many dinners with first-year seminars that students do not perceive to be connected to their Commons experience and produces minimal sustained faculty-student connection.

The reviewers recommend that the College can better leverage the valuable asset the Heads represent by decoupling the Heads role from the Commons system, suggesting instead, that Middlebury repurpose these appointments to provide greater connections between students and faculty across all disciplines and impacting all students in an out-of-classroom environment. To that end, they recommend the following action items:

- Expand the team of faculty who support this work by redesigning the faculty affiliates program, which does not appear to be working at present. Each faculty Head could lead a group of faculty from a diverse array of disciplines to coordinate and host events connected to visiting speakers; gatherings that enable groups of faculty, staff, and students to discuss campus issues; and teach-in type meetings that enable faculty to facilitate discussion on current global, national, and local issues.
- Repurpose the Heads houses to support this new mission
- Use spaces such as Atwater as sites for community gatherings.
- Think intentionally about the most appropriate number of Heads (however designated in the future), since it would no longer be fixed by the number of Commons.

An example of this type of faculty role on campus can be found at Connecticut College in the Residential Education Fellows (REF) Program. The REF program is a highly collaborative faculty, staff and student initiative that builds community and offers opportunities for intellectual engagement outside the classroom. The program is coordinated by the Director of Residence Life and a faculty REF director. Eleven faculty and eleven student leaders in Resident Assistant type roles collaborate to create programs that address a variety of issues and interests to the college community. The strength of the REF program lies in the diversity of offerings, the faculty/student/staff collaborative model, and the speed with which program planning, publicity, and execution can take place. A noteworthy component of the program is REF Rapid Response--the REF program can serve as somewhat of a “first responder” to the needs of the campus community in delivering programs that are important to the community due to local, regional, national, and/or global events.

Suggestions for Improving the Residential Life Program

With respect to Middlebury's residential life and Commons system, the reviewers identified numerous areas for structural changes and improvement. Their recommendations come with the understanding that some are easily attainable, while others will require more time, discussion and resources, and therefore they encouraged Middlebury to establish a prioritized list with respect to feasibility and timeframe.

1. Implement a common electronic database system, with appropriate levels of privacy confidentiality, for the sharing of student records and "tracking" of student concerns.
2. Revise the Commons Deans structure in order to enhance greater coordination and consistency of expectations. There should be a clear supervisory line to one supervisor (presumably this would be the senior associate dean of students under the current structure), who can establish commonly understood accountabilities for the Deans' roles and responsibilities regarding general student support, academic advising, and case management.
3. Rather than having the 5 CRDs report to the 5 commons deans, students and staff would be better served by having a single director of residence life to whom the CRDs would report. The CRDs should continue to live in residence, and have offices in the halls. The director of residence life, who would live out, could also supervise a housing coordinator to manage student room changes and serve as a liaison with maintenance staff.
4. Create a residential curriculum that sets learning goals for Middlebury students, and promotes consistent programming in the residence halls with the purpose of building community. As preparation for this effort, Middlebury might consider sending a team to ACPA's Institute on the Curricular Approach (see http://www.myacpa.org/events/ica). The plan should incorporate an intentional, comprehensive approach to diversity, equity, inclusion goals that are woven into the first-year experience program. This will likely require additional training and job performance expectations for the student residence life staff.
5. Adopt innovative approaches to enhancing staff diversity - both with respect to recruitment and retention - and addressing campus climate concerns. While acknowledging the challenges of Middlebury's location in Addison County, Vermont, the reviewers nevertheless, expressed the belief that creative and concerted hiring practices will yield greater diversity among staff, and that reflects the increasingly diverse composition of the Middlebury student body. They also encouraged enhanced coordination with the Anderson Freeman Center for staff recruitment and training purposes, while emphasizing that there should be shared ownership among all student affairs staff for promoting a diverse and inclusive climate at Middlebury.
6. Co-locate the "Febs" into one residence hall with dedicated student residence life staff. The fact that they are currently scattered across campus reduces their sense of cohesion and immediate sense of belonging at Middlebury (although we noted the strong "Febs" affinity that the students expressed). One option would be to designate one residence hall, or a section of a residence hall, that is proximate to other first-year housing but that houses juniors who intend to study abroad in the spring semester - with the expectation that even if plans change, the juniors are still required to move out.
7. Develop plans for the renovation of Battell Hall. Many people, both staff and students,

commented on the poor condition of the Hall. The current state and size of Battell impacts the residential life system, especially regarding first-year housing. In particular, the poor quality of gathering spaces that many noted has a direct impact on the success of a first-year residential program.

Conclusion

Middlebury has a tremendous opportunity in the coming years to adapt key aspects of the Commons system to develop a signature first-year program that best supports students and distinguishes the College from its peers. The strength of the current Commons system is its capacity for introducing students to Middlebury and creating a supportive network of faculty, staff, and student leaders who are deeply dedicated to student success in the first year. Therefore, clarifying the Commons as a first-year program aligns the program with what it is doing in practice and with what students perceive to be its central contribution to their Middlebury education. The proposed changes also maximize the impact of the financial and human resources dedicated to supporting students' experience outside of the classroom. This is not only important in terms of fiscal responsibility but also would ensure that the programs described through the admissions process are delivered as expected once students arrive on campus.

In addition to the specific recommended changes to the Commons, Middlebury has the opportunity to reshape the way that it supports students across all four years by moving away from decentralized practices that tend to silo student support. Those areas that can be more effective through either centralization or enhanced coordination include residence life, student conduct, Commons Deans roles, and the CARE Team (Behavioral Intervention Team). The changes recommended should contribute to improved information sharing and greater consistency across departments, that will translate into profoundly improved student support, and students' perception of the College.

There are many campus examples that can serve as models to inspire new ideas, and there are many regional and national conferences and institutes that offer time, space, and expertise to help Middlebury think creatively about its future paths. The review team also shared additional resources for best practices in building and refining a first-year program:

- The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at The University of South Carolina.
- The Association of American Colleges and & Universities' (AAC&U) *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* publication provides a helpful framework for planning high-impact student initiatives.
- The Monserrat first -year experience program at The College of the Holy Cross